**World War II Overview/Summary**

**War and Uneasy Neutrality**

Before Roosevelt's second term was well under way, his domestic program was overshadowed by the expansionist designs of totalitarian regimes in Japan, Italy, and Germany. In 1931 Japan had invaded Manchuria, crushed Chinese resistance, and set up the puppet state of Manchukuo. Italy, under Benito Mussolini, enlarged its boundaries in Libya and in 1935 conquered Ethiopia. Germany, under Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, militarized its economy and reoccupied the Rhineland (demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles) in 1936. In 1938, Hitler incorporated Austria into the German Reich and demanded cession of the German-speaking Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. By then, war seemed imminent.

The United States, disillusioned by the failure of the crusade for democracy in World War I, announced that in no circumstances could any country involved in the conflict look to it for aid. Neutrality legislation, enacted piecemeal from 1935 to 1937, prohibited trade in arms with any warring nations, required cash for all other commodities, and forbade American flag merchant ships from carrying those goods. The objective was to prevent, at almost any cost, the involvement of the United States in a foreign war.

With the Nazi conquest of Poland in 1939 and the outbreak of World War II, isolationist sentiment increased, even though Americans clearly favored the victims of Hitler's aggression and supported the Allied democracies, Britain and France. Roosevelt could only wait until public opinion regarding U.S. involvement was altered by events.

After the fall of France and the beginning of the German air war against Britain in mid-1940, the debate intensified between those in the United States who favored aiding the democracies and the antiwar faction known as the isolationists. Roosevelt did what he could to nudge public opinion toward intervention. The United States joined Canada in a Mutual Board of Defense, and aligned with the Latin American republics in extending collective protection to the nations in the Western Hemisphere.

Congress, confronted with the mounting crisis, voted immense sums for rearmament, and in September 1940 passed the first peacetime conscription bill ever enacted in the United States. In that month also, Roosevelt concluded a daring executive agreement with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The United States gave the British Navy 50 "overage" destroyers in return for British air and naval bases in Newfoundland and the North Atlantic.

The 1940 presidential election campaign demonstrated that the isolationists, while vocal, were a minority. Roosevelt's Republican opponent, Wendell Wilkie, leaned toward intervention. Thus the November election yielded another majority for the president, making Roosevelt the first, and last, U. S. chief executive to be elected to a third term.

In early 1941, Roosevelt got Congress to approve the Lend-Lease Program, which enabled him to transfer arms and equipment to any nation (notably Great Britain, later the Soviet Union and China) deemed vital to the defense of the United States. Total Lend-Lease aid by war's end would amount to more than $50,000 million.

Most remarkably, in August, he met with Prime Minister Churchill off the coast of Newfoundland. The two leaders issued a *"joint statement of war aims,"* which they called the Atlantic Charter. Bearing a remarkable resemblance to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, it called for these objectives: no territorial aggrandizement; no territorial changes without the consent of the people concerned; the right of all people to choose their own form of government; the restoration of self-government to those deprived of it; economic collaboration between all nations; freedom from war, from fear, and from want for all peoples; freedom of the seas; and the abandonment of the use of force as an instrument of international policy.

America was now neutral in name only.

**Japan, Pearl Harbor, and War**

While most Americans anxiously watched the course of the European war, tension mounted in Asia. Taking advantage of an opportunity to improve its strategic position, Japan boldly announced a "new order" in which it would exercise hegemony over all of the Pacific. Battling for survival against Nazi Germany, Britain was unable to resist, abandoning its concession in Shanghai and temporarily closing the Chinese supply route from Burma. In the summer of 1940, Japan won permission from the weak Vichy government in France to use airfields in northern Indochina (North Vietnam). That September the Japanese formally joined the Rome-Berlin Axis. The United States countered with an embargo on the export of scrap iron to Japan.

In July 1941 the Japanese occupied southern Indochina (South Vietnam), signaling a probable move southward toward the oil, tin, and rubber of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The United States, in response, froze Japanese assets and initiated an embargo on the one commodity Japan needed above all others -- oil.

General Hideki Tojo became prime minister of Japan that October. In mid-November, he sent a special envoy to the United States to meet with Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Among other things, Japan demanded that the United States release Japanese assets and stop U.S. naval expansion in the Pacific. Hull countered with a proposal for Japanese withdrawal from all its conquests. The swift Japanese rejection on December 1 left the talks stalemated.

On the morning of December 7, Japanese carrier based planes executed a devastating surprise attack against the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Twenty-one ships were destroyed or temporarily disabled; 323 aircraft were destroyed or damaged; 2,388 soldiers, sailors, and civilians were killed. However, the U.S. aircraft carriers that would play such a critical role in the ensuing naval war in the Pacific were at sea and not anchored at Pearl Harbor.

American opinion, still divided about the war in Europe, was unified overnight by what President Roosevelt called *"a day that will live in infamy."* On December 8, Congress declared a state of war with Japan; three days later Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.

**Mobilization for Total War**

The nation rapidly geared itself for mobilization of its people and its entire industrial capacity. Over the next three-and-a-half years, war industry achieved staggering production goals -- 300,000 aircraft, 5,000 cargo ships, 60,000 landing craft, 86,000 tanks. Women workers, exemplified by "Rosie the Riveter," played a bigger part in industrial production than ever before. Total strength of the U.S. armed forces at the end of the war was more than 12 million. All the nation's activities -- farming, manufacturing, mining, trade, labor, investment, communications, even education and cultural undertakings -- were in some fashion brought under new and enlarged controls.

  
Assembly line of P-38 Lightning fighter planes during World War II. With its massive output of war materiel, the United States became, in the words of President Roosevelt, "the arsenal of democracy."  
*(Lockheed)*

As a result of Pearl Harbor and the fear of Asian espionage, Americans also committed what was later recognized as an act of intolerance: the internment of Japanese Americans. In February 1942, nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans residing in California were removed from their homes and interned behind barbed wire in 10 wretched temporary camps, later to be moved to "relocation centers" outside isolated Southwestern towns.

Nearly 63 percent of these Japanese Americans were American-born U.S. citizens. A few were Japanese sympathizers, but no evidence of espionage ever surfaced. Others volunteered for the U.S. Army and fought with distinction and valor in two infantry units on the Italian front. Some served as interpreters and translators in the Pacific.

In 1983 the U.S. government acknowledged the injustice of internment with limited payments to those Japanese Americans of that era who were still living.

**The War in North Africa and Europe**

Soon after the United States entered the war, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union (at war with Germany since June 22, 1941) decided that their primary military effort was to be focused in Europe.

Throughout 1942, British and German forces fought inconclusive back-and-forth battles across Libya and Egypt for control of the Suez Canal. But on October 23, British forces commanded by General Sir Bernard Montgomery struck at the Germans from El Alamein. Equipped with a thousand tanks, many made in America, they defeated General Erwin Rommel's army in a grinding two-week campaign. On November 7, American and British armed forces landed in French North Africa. Squeezed between forces advancing from east and west, the Germans were pushed back and, after fierce resistance, surrendered in May 1943.

The year 1942 was also the turning point on the Eastern Front. The Soviet Union, suffering immense losses, stopped the Nazi invasion at the gates of Leningrad and Moscow. In the winter of 1942-43, the Red Army defeated the Germans at Stalingrad (Volgograd) and began the long offensive that would take them to Berlin in 1945.

In July 1943 British and American forces invaded Sicily and won control of the island in a month. During that time, Benito Mussolini fell from power in Italy. His successors began negotiations with the Allies and surrendered immediately after the invasion of the Italian mainland in September. However, the German Army had by then taken control of the peninsula. The fight against Nazi forces in Italy was bitter and protracted. Rome was not liberated until June 4, 1944. As the Allies slowly moved north, they built airfields from which they made devastating air raids against railroads, factories, and weapon emplacements in southern Germany and central Europe, including the oil installations at Ploesti, Romania.

Late in 1943 the Allies, after much debate over strategy, decided to open a front in France to compel the Germans to divert far larger forces from the Soviet Union.

U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower was appointed Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe. After immense preparations, on June 6, 1944, a U.S., British, and Canadian invasion army, protected by a greatly superior air force, landed on five beaches in Normandy. With the beachheads established after heavy fighting, more troops poured in, and pushed the Germans back in one bloody engagement after another. On August 25 Paris was liberated.

The Allied offensive stalled that fall, then suffered a setback in eastern Belgium during the winter, but in March, the Americans and British were across the Rhine and the Russians advancing irresistibly from the East. On May 7, Germany surrendered unconditionally.

**The War in the Pacific**

  
World War II in the Pacific was characterized by large-scale naval and air battles. Here, a Japanese plane plunges in flames during an attack on a U.S. carrier fleet in the Mariana Islands, June 1944. U.S. Army and Marine forces' "island hopping" campaign began at Guadalcanal in August 1942 and ended with the assault on Okinawa in April 1945.  
*(The National Archives)*

U.S. troops were forced to surrender in the Philippines in early 1942, but the Americans rallied in the following months. General James "Jimmy" Doolittle led U.S. Army bombers on a raid over Tokyo in April; it had little actual military significance, but gave Americans an immense psychological boost.

In May, at the Battle of the Coral Sea -- the first naval engagement in history in which all the fighting was done by carrier-based planes -- a Japanese naval invasion fleet sent to strike at southern New Guinea and Australia was turned back by a U.S. task force in a close battle. A few weeks later, the naval Battle of Midway in the central Pacific resulted in the first major defeat of the Japanese Navy, which lost four aircraft carriers. Ending the Japanese advance across the central Pacific, Midway was the turning point.

Other battles also contributed to Allied success. The six-month land and sea battle for the island of Guadalcanal (August 1942-February 1943) was the first major U.S. ground victory in the Pacific. For most of the next two years, American and Australian troops fought their way northward from the South Pacific and westward from the Central Pacific, capturing the Solomons, the Gilberts, the Marshalls, and the Marianas in a series of amphibious assaults.

**The Politics of War**

Allied military efforts were accompanied by a series of important international meetings on the political objectives of the war. In January 1943 at Casablanca, Morocco, an Anglo-American conference decided that no peace would be concluded with the Axis and its Balkan satellites except on the basis of "unconditional surrender." This term, insisted upon by Roosevelt, sought to assure the people of all the fighting nations that no separate peace negotiations would be carried on with representatives of Fascism and Nazism and there would be no compromise of the war's idealistic objectives. Axis propagandists, of course, used it to assert that the Allies were engaged in a war of extermination.

At Cairo, in November 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill met with Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek to agree on terms for Japan, including the relinquishment of gains from past aggression. At Tehran, shortly afterward, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin made basic agreements on the postwar occupation of Germany and the establishment of a new international organization, the United Nations.

  
Meeting of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, President Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Josef Stalin at Yalta in February 1945. Disagreements over the future of Europe anticipated the division of the European continent that remained a fixture of the Cold War.  
*(U.S. Army)*

In February 1945, the three Allied leaders met again at Yalta (now in Ukraine), with victory seemingly secure. There, the Soviet Union secretly agreed to enter the war against Japan three months after the surrender of Germany. In return, the USSR would gain effective control of Manchuria and receive the Japanese Kurile Islands as well as the southern half of Sakhalin Island. The eastern boundary of Poland was set roughly at the Curzon line of 1919, thus giving the USSR half its prewar territory. Discussion of reparations to be collected from Germany -- payment demanded by Stalin and opposed by Roosevelt and Churchill -- was inconclusive. Specific arrangements were made concerning Allied occupation in Germany and the trial and punishment of war criminals. Also at Yalta it was agreed that the great powers in the Security Council of the proposed United Nations should have the right of veto in matters affecting their security.

Two months after his return from Yalta, Franklin Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage while vacationing in Georgia. Few figures in U.S. history have been so deeply mourned, and for a time the American people suffered from a numbing sense of irreparable loss. Vice President Harry Truman, former senator from Missouri, succeeded him.

**War, Victory, and the Bomb**

The final battles in the Pacific were among the war's bloodiest. In June 1944, the Battle of the Philippine Sea effectively destroyed Japanese naval air power, forcing the resignation of Japanese Prime Minister Tojo. General Douglas MacArthur -- who had reluctantly left the Philippines two years before to escape Japanese capture -- returned to the islands in October. The accompanying Battle of Leyte Gulf, the largest naval engagement ever fought, was the final decisive defeat of the Japanese Navy. By February 1945, U.S. forces had taken Manila.

  
General Douglas MacArthur (center) had declared, "I shall return," when he escaped from advancing Japanese forces in the Philippines in 1942. Two years later, he made good on his promise and waded ashore at Leyte as U.S. forces began the liberation of the Philippines.  
*(The National Archives)*

Next, the United States set its sight on the strategic island of Iwo Jima in the Bonin Islands, about halfway between the Marianas and Japan. The Japanese, trained to die fighting for the Emperor, made suicidal use of natural caves and rocky terrain. U.S. forces took the island by mid-March, but not before losing the lives of some 6,000 U.S. Marines. Nearly all the Japanese defenders perished. By now the United States was undertaking extensive air attacks on Japanese shipping and airfields and wave after wave of incendiary bombing attacks against Japanese cities.

At Okinawa (April 1-June 21, 1945), the Americans met even fiercer resistance. With few of the defenders surrendering, the U.S. Army and Marines were forced to wage a war of annihilation. Waves of Kamikaze suicide planes pounded the offshore Allied fleet, inflicting more damage than at Leyte Gulf. Japan lost 90-100,000 troops and probably as many Okinawian civilians. U.S. losses were more than 11,000 killed and nearly 34,000 wounded. Most Americans saw the fighting as a preview of what they would face in a planned invasion of Japan.

The heads of the U.S., British, and Soviet governments met at Potsdam, a suburb outside Berlin, from July 17 to August 2, 1945, to discuss operations against Japan, the peace settlement in Europe, and a policy for the future of Germany. Perhaps presaging the coming end of the alliance, they had no trouble on vague matters of principle or the practical issues of military occupation, but reached no agreement on many tangible issues, including reparations.

The day before the Potsdam Conference began, U.S. nuclear scientists engaged in the secret Manhattan Project exploded an atomic bomb near Alamogordo, New Mexico. The test was the culmination of three years of intensive research in laboratories across the United States. It lay behind the Potsdam Declaration, issued on July 26 by the United States and Britain, promising that Japan would neither be destroyed nor enslaved if it surrendered. If Japan continued the war, however, it would meet "prompt and utter destruction." President Truman, calculating that an atomic bomb might be used to gain Japan's surrender more quickly and with fewer casualties than an invasion of the mainland, ordered that the bomb be used if the Japanese did not surrender by August 3.

A committee of U.S. military and political officials and scientists had considered the question of targets for the new weapon. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson argued successfully that Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital and a repository of many national and religious treasures, be taken out of consideration. Hiroshima, a center of war industries and military operations, became the first objective.

On August 6, a U.S. plane, the Enola Gay, dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. On August 9, a second atomic bomb was dropped, this time on Nagasaki. The bombs destroyed large sections of both cities, with massive loss of life. On August 8, the USSR declared war on Japan and attacked Japanese forces in Manchuria. On August 14, Japan agreed to the terms set at Potsdam. On September 2, 1945, Japan formally surrendered. Americans were relieved that the bomb hastened the end of the war. The realization of the full implications of nuclear weapons' awesome destructiveness would come later.

Within a month, on October 24, the United Nations came into existence following the meeting of representatives of 50 nations in San Francisco, California. The constitution they drafted outlined a world organization in which international differences could be discussed peacefully and common cause made against hunger and disease. In contrast to its rejection of U.S. membership in the League of Nations after World War I, the U.S. Senate promptly ratified the U.N. Charter by an 89 to 2 vote. This action confirmed the end of the spirit of isolationism as a dominating element in American foreign policy.

In November 1945 at Nuremberg, Germany, the criminal trials of 22 Nazi leaders, provided for at Potsdam, took place. Before a group of distinguished jurists from Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States, the Nazis were accused not only of plotting and waging aggressive war but also of violating the laws of war and of humanity in the systematic genocide, known as the Holocaust, of European Jews and other peoples. The trials lasted more than 10 months. Twenty-two defendants were convicted, 12 of them sentenced to death. Similar proceedings would be held against Japanese war leaders.

**The Rise of Industrial Nations**

While the 1920s were years of relative prosperity in the United States, the workers in industries such as steel, automobiles, rubber and textiles benefitted less than many others. Working conditions in many of these industries remained as onerous as they had been in the previous century. Until 1923, for example, the average U.S. steel worker was expected to work a 12-hour day, with one day off every two weeks.

The 1920s saw the owners of the mass production industries redouble their efforts to prevent the growth of unions, which under the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had enjoyed some success during World War I. This took many forms, including the use of spies, armed strikebreakers and firing of those suspected of union sympathies. Independent unions were often accused of being communist. At the same time, many companies formed their own union organizations.

Traditionally, state legislatures supported the concept of the "open shop," which prevented a union from being the exclusive representative of all workers. This made it easier for companies to deny unions the right to collective bargaining and block unionization through court enforcement. On a more positive note, some companies in the 1920s began offering workers various pension, profit-sharing, stock option and health plans to ensure their loyalty.

Beginning with steel in 1919, companies harshly suppressed a series of strikes in the mass production industries. Between 1920 and 1929, as a result, union membership in the United States dropped from about five million to three-and-a-half million.

The onset of the Great Depression led to a precipitous drop in demand for all types of industrial production. The result was widespread unemployment. By 1933 there were over 12 million Americans out of work. In the automobile industry, for example, the work force was cut in half between 1929 and 1933. At the same time, wages dropped by two-thirds.

The election of Franklin Roosevelt, however, was to change the status of the American industrial worker forever.

The first indication that Roosevelt was interested in the well-being of workers came with the appointment of Frances Perkins, a prominent advocate of workplace reform, to be his secretary of labor. (Perkins was also the first woman to hold a Cabinet-level position.) In June 1933 Congress passed the far-reaching National Industrial Recovery Act. It sought to raise industrial wages, limit the hours in a work week and eliminate child labor. Most important, the law prohibited companies from forcing employees to join "company" unions, and recognized the right of employees "to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing."

It was John L. Lewis, the feisty and articulate head of the United Mine Workers (UMW), who understood more than any other labor leader what the New Deal meant for workers. Stressing Roosevelt's support, Lewis engineered a major unionizing campaign, building the UMW's membership from 150,000 to over 500,000 within a year.

Lewis was eager to get the AFL, where he was a member of the Executive Council, to launch a similar drive in the mass production industries. But the AFL, with its historic focus on the skilled trade worker, was unwilling to do so. After a bitter internal feud, Lewis and a few others broke with the AFL to set up the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), later called the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The first targets for Lewis and the CIO were the notoriously anti-union auto and steel industries. In late 1936, a series of spontaneous sit-down strikes erupted at General Motors plants in Cleveland, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan. Lewis responded quickly by sending a team of union organizers and funds of $100,000 to help the strikers. Soon 135,000 workers were involved and the industry ground to a halt.

With the help of the sympathetic governor of Michigan, a settlement was reached in 1937. By September of that year, the United Auto Workers had contracts with 400 companies involved in the automobile industry, assuring workers a minimum wage of 75 cents per hour and a 40-hour work week.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the steel-making capital of the United States, representatives of the steel industry attacked Lewis in print for being a "red" and a "bloodsucker." Labor, however, was buoyed by Roosevelt's re-election as well as the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in 1936. In the first six months of its existence, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), headed by Lewis lieutenant Philip Murray, picked up 125,000 members.

The capitulation of General Motors had a marked effect on the company, U.S. Steel. Realizing that times had changed, it came to terms with the CIO in 1937. That same year the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the NLRA. Subsequently, smaller companies, traditionally even more anti-union than U.S. Steel, reached agreements with the CIO unions. One by one other industries -- rubber, oil, electronics and textiles -- also followed suit. The mass production worker was no longer alone.